

YANDELL (L.P.)

OLD AGE:

ITS

Diseases and its Hygiene.

BY

LUNSFORD P. YANDELL, M. D.

LOUISVILLE, KY.

*Reprint from American Practitioner,
February, 1878.*



OLD AGE:

ITS

DISEASES AND ITS HYGIENE.

By LUNSFORD P. YANDELL, M. D.

LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY.

REPRINTED FROM THE AMERICAN PRACTITIONER, FEBRUARY, 1878.



LOUISVILLE, KY.

1878.

OLD AGE: ITS DISEASES AND ITS HYGIENE.

BY LUNSFORD P. YANDELL, M. D.

We are able to ascertain with sufficient precision what is the average duration of human life in any given community, but vital statistics have hitherto failed to determine the natural boundaries of man's earthly existence. They were declared by the patriarch to be three score years and ten,* but the patriarch lived himself to nearly twice that age, and yet then, it was said of him, that his eye was not dim nor his natural force abated.† Tables of mortality show that of a hundred persons born in civilized countries, one half pay the debt of nature before they are ten years old; seventy die before they reach manhood or womanhood; and only six of the whole number are alive at sixty. Still it appears that in seven years, that is from 1838 to 1844, seven hundred and eighty people in England alone lived beyond their hundredth year. And Easton, in 1799,‡ published a list of seventeen hundred and twelve instances of longevity extending beyond a century.

The greatest age attained by any individual in modern times was one hundred and sixty-nine years. More extreme cases have been recorded, but Haller, who investigated them with great care, doubted their authenticity. In not a few of these instances, as has been said of Moses, there was no senile decay exhibited in life, nor was any found in the bodies of the old men after their decease. Thomas Parr, the Shropshire

* Moses, Psalm 90. † Deuteronomy, 34:7.

‡ Jameson's Changes in Human Body, page 298.

peasant, whose history is rendered doubly interesting by its association with Harvey, affords a striking example. He lived one hundred and fifty-two years and nine months, having enjoyed most perfect health until within a few days of his death, which was attributed to plethora of the lungs brought on by change of air and habits. His viscera were all sound and strong, and his heart was large and fat. The learned court physician could find in his organs no reason why he might not have lived many years longer if he had remained at home in the country.

Parr was a poor farmer's servant, and lived by his daily labor. His second wife, whom he married when over one hundred and twenty, reported of him that he never betrayed any signs of infirmity or age during the twelve years they lived together. Charles I. was curious to see so rare a specimen of manhood, and invited the old peasant to London, where he was treated in so royal a manner at court that a congestion of his lungs was induced which soon terminated his life.

Henry Jenkins, a fisherman, who reached one hundred and sixty-nine years, was still able to swim across rapid rivers after he had gone beyond a century.

Draakenberg, a Dane, resolved to get married, settle down, and "lead a tranquil life," after having spent one hundred and eleven years of it principally in the army; and outliving one wife, a woman of half his age, he sought, in his one hundred and thirtieth year, the hand of a young country girl, but finally, after several rebuffs, concluded to remain single, and in that state lived to see his one hundred and forty-sixth year. He is described as having been a man of "rather violent temper," and of great bodily strength, many proofs of which he exhibited during the last years of his life.

Effingham, of Cornwall, died in the one hundred and forty-fourth year of his age, having hardly known what sickness was up to his one hundred and ninth year, working to the last as a day laborer, and walking three miles only eight days before he died. Stender, of the Duchy of Holstein, who reached

his one hundred and third year, it is said, "was never sick, and could never be put out of humor."

A remarkable instance of longevity was reported by Dr. Ornstein, surgeon-in-chief of the Greek army, a year ago. Stravarides, a Greek, died toward the close of 1876, at the age of one hundred and thirty-two years. His history was that he had led a rather intemperate life, consuming daily more than one hundred drachms of brandy, and yet, up to the time of his death, he was in possession of all his senses and still retained his teeth. He was also quite active, dancing when intoxicated. He was born twenty-six years before the great Napoleon, and witnessed the reign of nine sultans.*

The natural duration of man is conjectured by Hufeland to be two hundred years, the life of animals being, as a rule, eight times the period of their growth, and man reaching maturity only at twenty-five.† But there is the serious difficulty in the way of this hypothesis, that no human being since the age immediately succeeding the flood has attained to two hundred years. Abraham reached only to one hundred and seventy-nine, and Jacob, the most aged of the patriarchs, only to one hundred and eighty.

In truth, we have to confess that we know not what is the natural term of human life. We are unable to explain these cases of extreme longevity; nor can we tell why the duration of life varies so much among animals, why the swan and the crow among birds, for example, are "many wintered," while the domestic fowl, which matures at the same age, lives only a few years.

As to the average age of the human race, that depends upon conditions well understood. Climate, personal habits, occupation and modes of life, are known to be vastly influential; but of these centenarians it appears that one at least was an inhabitant of Jamaica; most of them were peasants, but Hippocrates, a student and a philosopher, was of the number; generally they were of peaceful tempers, but one cer-

* New York Medical Journal, January, 1877.

† Art of Prolonging Life, page 91.

tainly was irascible, and another spent sixty-seven years of his life exposed to all the dangers and excitements of war.*

But, though unable to account for longevity, or to recognize the stamina upon which it depends, we know that it is hereditary. Parr had a great-grandson, at Cork, who lived to be one hundred and three years old. Dr. Rush says he never met a person over eighty whose ancestors were not long-lived. Any one who has looked through the inscriptions in ancient churchyards, must have remarked how much long life runs in families. At the same time, there can not be a doubt that they are most likely to attain it who observe the laws of health in youth and manhood. Of all Haller's aged men not one, it is affirmed, was an idler. Some were fond of strong drink, but as a rule they did not indulge until they were far advanced in years. The dissipated young man may assuredly know that he is drawing a bill on the future which is sure to mature, and may have to be met before he is old.

The *senectus* of the ancients may be expected, usually from fifty-five to sixty; the *ætas decrepita* is not often delayed beyond eighty, though either may be postponed long beyond their time, as we have seen, and may be brought on prematurely. A number of the old men mentioned were young, as well in feeling as in constitution, at eighty, and some when they had advanced far beyond a hundred; but the large majority of the race grow old before their time. Hufeland reports the case of a man dissected by him who, at the age of forty, exhibited all the signs of bodily decay. His hair was gray, and even the cartilages of his ribs were ossified, as they are found to be in old subjects. A still more extreme case was that of the young king of Hungary, Louis II., who was crowned in his second year, succeeded to the throne in his tenth, had a beard at fourteen, was married before he reached fifteen, was gray at eighteen, and died worn out before he was twenty years old.

* This was a Prussian soldier, who was in seventeen general actions; had his horse shot under him, and was repeatedly wounded; was three times married after he retired from the army, the third time in his one hundred and eleventh year.

The evidences of decline appear first in the hair, which begins to frost or grow thinner, and to lose something of its luster; at the same time the skin shows a little less of the glow of youth, and the eyesight is not so perfect. The step has become somewhat less elastic, and a little later some waning of the memory is observed, resulting from incipient changes in the structure of the brain. To these indications of decay succeed in most men more or less trouble in the urinary function. Micturition is performed with less ease, owing to enlargement of the prostate gland, and must be repeated oftener. The urine is charged with the lithates, in consequence of imperfect oxydation, and is voided in larger quantities. The enlargement of the prostate may aid in the retention of the urine, and thus, up to a certain point, be a convenience, but when it becomes excessive, terrible suffering results from it.

In this first epoch of declining age, grave changes often occur also in the arteries, the coats of which become atheromatous and brittle. Degeneration in the heart, lungs and kidneys, is an event to be apprehended; and diabetes, albuminuria, asthma, angina pectoris, dropsy and apoplexy, are diseases incident to this period of life.

As years accumulate decrepitude comes on, and though the thoracic and abdominal viscera escape disease, time never fails to exhibit its force in the muscular and nervous systems. The "lean and slippered pantaloon" is associated with a brain in which the cells are no longer connected by a perfect interlacement; but their "spur-like processes are worn through, and the cerebral cell is rounded and club-shaped."* The memory decays until it is finally lost. The hand is tremulous, coöordinated movements are badly executed, and the old man totters as he walks. Portal compares the nerves in aged persons to the branches of a tree covered with moss, and he also held that their brains are contracted and hardened; but oftener, it seems, the change is of the opposite character.

* Fothergill. Hand-Book of Treatment, page 166.

Galen regarded the period of old age as a continued dis-temper, and it is well for old men, however healthy they may seem, to remember that their systems, as was said by Bacon, are "towers undermined;" for with those latent changes constantly going on in the arteries, heart and brain, they may be constantly exposed to sudden death. Apoplexy may result from straining, as in the act of defecation, and fatal syncope may be induced by a fit of passion. John Hunter was aware of a disease of his heart by which his life was threatened at all times, and which any violence of feeling might render fatal; and yet he suffered himself to be drawn into an angry dispute, in which he fell down and instantly expired.

Sir A. Cooper refers to a case in which, with ossification of the coronary arteries, the coats of the large arteries were so thin that they were with difficulty removed from their places, and broke with the slightest mechanical pressure. Dr. Moun-say, who died in London, in the ninety-sixth year of his age, toward the close of the last century, was confident, from cer-tain symptoms with which he suffered, that he had ossification of the heart, and left his body by will to be dissected. Ossi-fic patches were found, not only on his heart, but on the aorta and the pulmonary artery; all the valves of the heart were extensively ossified, and the iliac and femoral arteries and their branches, extending down to the toes, were nearly con-tinued tubes of bone.*

Of few men can it be affirmed with truth that "of no dis-ease they died, but hung like autumn fruit that ripened long." The great majority are cut off prematurely by disease or acci-dent. The diseases of declining life may be inferred from the account given of the structural changes of the body which occur in old age. How to avert or alleviate them is the inter-esting question which hygiene proposes to solve.

"We are continually surrounded," says Hufeland, "by the friends and the enemies of life; he who keeps company with its friends will become old, but he who prefers its enemies will shorten his existence." It has been remarked of nearly

* Jameson. *Op. cit.*, page 147.

all the instances of extreme longevity that the subjects were of a cheerful temper, loquacious, hopeful, susceptible of love and joy, and insensible to the impressions of hatred and avarice. In other words, their digestion was good; for it is impossible to suppose that such a temper could ever consist with dyspepsia. Imperfect mastication resulting from loss of teeth is often the cause of indigestion in the aged, and is to be remedied by good cooking, one object of which is to soften the food and prepare it for the action of the digestive fluid in the stomach.

Constipation, which is a frequent trouble of old age, also interferes seriously with digestion. I have for many years prescribed and used myself with great advantage a weak solution of common salt to keep the bowels open. A draught of two or three tumblers of a solution not strong enough to offend the stomach, and drunk before breakfast, seldom fails to procure a free evacuation, without any of the tenesmus which is apt to attend the operation of laxative pills. But an occasional Cooke's pill I have found to produce a very pleasant effect when what is known as a "biliary" state of the system prevails, as it is apt to do in old persons. My old friend, after whom the calomel, aloes and rhubarb pills are called, relieved many a case of dyspepsia by them in the course of his long practice.

Apoplexy, as has been remarked, is eminently a disease of advanced age. Of the persons who reach seventy in London, and no doubt it is equally true of most cities, one-fourth are shown by bills of mortality to die of apoplexy, or paralysis, which is its result. Heberden declared that the number of cases of this disease was doubled in London during the eighteenth century; and there is reason to believe that it everywhere increases with advancing civilization. By keeping the bowels free, one source of danger is obviated in the crippled condition of the arteries which makes an attack imminent.

The enfeebled power of generating heat renders aged persons extremely sensitive to cold, and liable to the complaints which cold engenders. Many old people, especially among

the poor, fall victims to pneumonia every winter. Dr. Cooke, just referred to, long a teacher of medicine in Kentucky, had repeated attacks of pneumonia, and finally died of one brought on by exposure to cold on his farm. If he stood on a cold pavement, at any time, until he began to shiver, he was sure, as I have often heard him remark, to have an attack.

With old people one great study is how to keep warm in cold weather. Boerhaave, it is related, renewed the vigor and activity of an old burgomaster by having him to sleep between two young persons. A hot brick to the feet at night aids greatly in maintaining the heat of the body, and in this way favors sleep. Among modern inventions I know few which have added more to the comfort of people of every age, who find it necessary to be out on the cold, sloppy ground or pavements, than gum elastic overshoes.

The ancient Romans, it has been stated, prolonged their lives by retiring to Naples, as soon as they felt the infirmities of age coming upon them. We have in the southwestern part of Texas, around San Antonio and Seguin, an elevated and healthy region to which the aged of our colder states might find it advantageous to retire during the winter.

Many old men endure a large amount of unnecessary suffering, especially in the urinary organs, from an apprehension that their infirmities are the inevitable results of age. A medical adviser will put them in the way of mitigating evils which can not be entirely overcome. Even so grave an affection as diabetes may be benefited by a proper regimen. The troubles connected with making water may be overcome, to some extent, by instruments. The calculous diathesis may be corrected by proper treatment, and the bladder rendered tolerant of a stone by alkalies. Sir A. Cooper relates a case in which a country parson, with a calculus in his bladder, was able to go fox-hunting under their use, and even persuaded himself that the stone was gone. By early attention, the calculus may be discovered while it is small and removed by a comparatively painless operation. Dr. Franklin's last years were embittered by a stone in his bladder. Dr. Physick, to-

wards the close of his life, operated on the aged Chief Justice of the United States, John Marshall, and removed more than a thousand small calculi from his bladder. Sir Walter Ogilvie, thirty years before, had one taken from his bladder in London, which weighed three pounds and four ounces, and died in ten days in consequence of the severe operation.

With a failing memory and other indications of senile decay, the querulousness of second childhood is expected to come on; and yet peevishness is not necessarily an attendant of old age. We have had in our own day and in our profession an instance of cheerfulness, with great bodily and mental strength and activity, maintained at an age which not many men reach. Few books composed in a more charming spirit have ever emanated from medical men than the "Recollections" of Sir Henry Holland, written after he had passed his eighty-second year.* Cicero probably overestimated the power of the mind to preserve its integrity against the wear of time, but there can not be a question that much may be done to delay the failure of its powers. Not only memory, but serenity of disposition may be improved and maintained by suitable appliances, one of the most important of which is pleasant occupation. If not kept in constant exercise the memory soon fails; and the mind, if not occupied, not only parts soon with its activity, but is almost sure to grow discontented, impatient and sour.

Old age hath yet his honor and his toil.†

Few greater mistakes could be made than the one often committed by old men of retiring too early from business. They soon learn, as Pascal expressed it long ago, that "what their minds require is not rest but perpetual excitement." The mind must have something upon which to fix its anticipations, or it is unhappy. One of the reasons why married

* Recollections of Past Life; a volume which may be commended to readers of every age and calling, for its matter, its pleasing style, and especially for the cheerful, benevolent temper which it displays.

† Tennyson's Ulysses.

people live longer than maids and bachelors, and are less liable to insanity, it may be is that they find this source of happiness in their offspring. Dr. Rush thought he had observed that old people who lived with their children, and were surrounded by grandchildren, enjoyed better health and spirits than when they lived by themselves. And there can not be a doubt as to the truth of his observation. Children to the aged are, indeed, "what leaves are to the forest," bringing a glow of sunshine into their hearts which otherwise would never reach them. On the tombstone of an old Roman schoolmaster, L. Clodius Hermippus, it is recorded—

Vixit annos CXV dies V.
Puellarum anhelitu.

Literally, "by the breath of maids;" but no doubt the idea meant to be expressed by the writer was that the life of the veteran schoolmaster had been lengthened as well as gladdened by the companionship of his young scholars.

The changes that take place in the brain as life advances involve necessarily a decay of the intellectual faculties, and with it a failure of the animal spirits, so that old age, unless counteracted by all the happy agencies that can be brought to bear upon it, is apt to become selfish, peevish, impatient, and unamiable. Some of these agencies have been mentioned, but much the most powerful of them all must be reckoned the promises and hopes of the Christian religion. These, where they have been firmly embraced, remain in the memory of the old man when nearly every other impression has faded from his mind. Instances are related of men who had forgotten the faces and even the names of their children, but who warmed up at once at the name of their Redeemer. "In the course of my inquiries" (concerning old age), says Dr. Rush, "I heard of a man of one hundred and one years of age, who declared that he had forgotten everything he had ever known except his God." In possession of a strong religious faith, the old man is serene under the accumulating infirmities of age, for he is looking forward to a life near at

hand in which infirmities have no place. He observes without anxiety or concern the failure of his mortal powers as he sees it going on from day to day, because he is assured that in a little while these powers will be clothed with immortality. And he approaches the valley of the shadow of death without fear, for he feels that he is leaning on an Almighty arm, and is persuaded that he has an eternal home in the heavens beyond.

The employments of old men, while they should be such as to fill the mind with gentle excitement, and save it from that weariness of life from which men have sometimes sought relief in suicide, ought never to be of a character to put either the body or the mind on the strain. Violent bodily exertion is attended, at that period of life, with dangers which have been pointed out. Equally ought the aged to avoid gusts of passion, which involve similar dangers; nor can the studious safely keep up "that painful thinking which corrodes the clay." The brain soon becomes fatigued, and sleep, the only restorer of lost nervous energy, must be indulged for longer periods. The sense of fatigue warns the laborer when his mind or his muscles require rest. But the thought with which I would close this essay is that the danger which most imperils the comfort of old age is, not overwork, but the want of enlivening occupation.

NOTE.—Just as the form containing this most interesting paper was going to press, the message of the death of its author was received. A peculiar interest, therefore, attaches to these, the last words to the profession of one of its noblest and most illustrious members. We rejoice he was spared to write this paper, terminating his long, useful, and honored life with such work. In a note accompanying the MSS., he remarked:—"This probably is the last of my contributions to medical journalism." What a true prophecy was unconsciously made! The last line he ever wrote was in regard to this paper. At noon on the Thursday before he died, feeling somewhat better—he had then been sick some days—he wrote his son thus, "I should like to see the proof of my article on Old—"; here his hand faltered, and the rest of the sentence was illegible. This incident

reminds us of a passage in the translator's preface to Sydenham's Practice: the translation was published in London, 1711. Sydenham was, at death, five years younger than Dr. Yandell, but the characters of these men present many points of similarity, and the passage we quote might apply equally well to each:—
"This worthy man was always busy in improving the practice of physick, even then when he was stepping on the threshhold of the other world, and, like the great Archimedes, would not suffer himself to be interrupted by anything but resistless fate."

T. P.

